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Can America win its next war?

Could America win its next war if it is compelled to fight one? It didn't win the last one, in Vietnam; it was fought to a standstill in the one before that, in Korea; and a number of military thinkers believe it could do no better in the future. They believe that the United States is prepared to fight the wrong kinds of wars in the wrong kinds of places with the wrong kinds of weapons. There is a growing sense of uneasiness in the U.S. military, a suspicion that all the billions being spent on defense may be buying a blunder on the scale of the Maginot Line that failed to slow the Germans in World War II.

There have been fundamental changes in the world since the last great U.S. military victory (the end of the colonial era, the communications boom) and in war (guerrillas, terrorism, high technology). Yet the basic structure of the U.S. military and the basic kinds of weapons it uses have not greatly changed since World War II. The three services—Army, Navy and Air Force—are organized in the same large and often unwieldy units that were needed to fight the mass battles of that war. The central weapon of the Army remains the heavy tank; of the Navy the large aircraft carrier; of the Air Force the manned high-performance bomber and fighter.

Should changes be made, and if so, what should they be?

Most military thinkers say that no great changes are needed, that except for a little tinkering here and there the present structure is just fine. The Army is building its huge M-1 tank, the Navy is campaigning for more giant carriers and the Air Force is building the B-1 bomber. The commitment to NATO, and to the stationing of more than 300,000 troops in Europe, remains firm, as does the commitment to Korea and Japan.

But others are calling for a complete re-evaluation. Their view is cogently expressed in the current issue of Foreign Affairs. Written by retired Adm. Stansfield Turner, a former director of the CIA, and Capt. George Thibault, chairman of the Department of Military Strategy at the National War College, the article questions a basic U.S. assumption—that the deployment of forces behind prepared defenses in Europe and Korea and the existence of about a dozen large-carrier task forces meets this country's global military needs.

They call instead for a doctrine they call "preparing for the unexpected." They contend that U.S. forces are more likely to be needed in unexpected places on short notice than in the carefully prepared theaters of Europe and Asia. They ridicule the idea that U.S. naval forces could hope to approach, blockade and destroy Soviet ships in port, which is one justification for large-carrier task forces.

What is needed, they write, is a doctrine of flexibility that will permit manageable units of U.S. forces to move quickly into crisis areas and to destroy the Soviet navy on the high seas, where it is most likely to be encountered. This, they say, is a "maritime strategy" that depends on controlling the sea and using it to project power around the world. That means a basic change in types of ships and weapons and in the organization of the forces.

Their main target is the large aircraft carrier. Adm. Turner has long advocated the construction of many small carriers instead of a few large ones on the ground that the big carriers are easy and tempting targets. An enemy could cripple our Navy by destroying only a few of them, and so will devote considerable money and effort to the task. By spreading the target value among a larger number of ships the enemy's problem becomes more difficult and the Navy's survivability is enhanced. The Navy resists the Turner thesis on the ground that the small-carrier doctrine requires low-performance short take-off aircraft armed with high-performance missiles, and that no such aircraft presently exist.

The Turner reply: Make them. One reason they don't exist is that there are no carriers that need them. He points out that any large carrier conceived today will not be operational for nearly 10 years and will have to serve for 30 years after that, or until around the year 2020. In the meantime, technological advances in missiles will make the small-carrier concept steadily more compelling. The sooner we start, he contends, the sooner we will have the kind of Navy that is needed.

The rest of U.S. forces should similarly be spread into smaller and more flexible units that can work independently or be pulled together in larger aggregates for larger tasks, such as 2,000-man Marine units equipped for "rapier thrusts" into problem areas. Armored units, the writers argue, should be far more mobile—which might be achieved by making armor and artillery lighter, faster and smaller. Also needed are more and better transport ships and planes to move U.S. forces quickly and in the numbers that might be needed.

One of the great dangers of an inadequate conventional strategy is that it makes nuclear war more likely. As long as conventional forces are able to serve the country's needs there will be no temptation to consider the nuclear option. But if the U.S. is caught unprepared for some challenge to basic national interests—a Soviet move against Middle East oilfields, perhaps—it would be a dangerously different matter.

The Turner-Thibault vision is, of course, a minority opinion. Adm. Turner occasionally tends to crankiness on the small-carrier subject (and the Navy establishment occasionally tends to apoplexy in denouncing it). Yet clearly there is something wrong with a global strategy that depends so heavily on a great many soldiers sitting, idle, in European barracks and a very few giant aircraft carriers sitting duck-like on the sea.

Congress and the military establishment should commence a serious debate on the question of whether America could win its next war—because if the answer is yes, there is much less chance that we will have to fight one.